

Message Text

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70

ACTION ARA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 COME-00 EB-07 INR-07 LAB-04

NSAE-00 SIL-01 DODE-00 PM-04 H-02 L-03 NSC-05 PA-01

PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 /069 W

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P R 191620Z FEB 76

FM AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0320

INFO AMEMBASSY GEORGETOWN

AMEMBASSY KINGSTON

AMEMBASSY NASSAU

AMEMBASSY PORT OF SPAIN

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EO 11652: NA

TAGS: PINT, AC

SUBJECT: ANTIGUA: ANTIGUA LABOR PARTY WINS UPSET VICTORY

1. IN GENRAL ELECTION HELD YESTERDAY (FEB 18) IN ANTIGUA, ANTIGUA LABOR PARTY (ALP) LED BY FORMER PREMIER VERE C. BIRD, WON UPSET VICTORY. WITH MOST RESULTS NOW IN, IT APPEARS THAT, THOUGH POPULAR VOTE NEARLY EVENLY DIVIDED, ALP WILL HAVE 10 SEATS IN NEW PARLIAMENT (17 SEATS IN ALL), WHILE PROGRESITVE MOVEMENT (PLM) OF GEORGE H. WALTER WILL HAVE FIVE. ONE OF THE TWO REMAINING SEATS WENT TO AN INDEPENDENT (BARBADIANSECESSIONIST CLAUDE FRANCIS) AND OUT-COME OF ELECTION TO DECIDE WHO WILL OCCUPY REMAINING SEAT HAS NOT YET BEEN DETERMINED.

2. COMMENT: MOST IMPARTIAL OBSERVERS HAD EXPECTED PLM TO BE RETURNED TO POWER, THOUGH WITH REDUCTION IN NUMBER OF SEATS. (IN 1971 ELECTION, PLM WON 13 OF 17 SEATS.) AMONG THOSE WHO LOST THEIR BIDS FOR REELECTION WERE TWO MINISTERS IN WALTER'S GOVERNMENT, ATTORNEY GENERAL GERWALD WATT AND MINISTER OF EDUCATION BASIL PETERS. ALP VICTORY UNDOUBTEDLY REFLECTS POPULAR

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DISAPPOINTMENT WITH PLM PERFORMANCE IN ECONOMIC AREA, AND

PROBABLY OWES SOMETHING AS WELL TO WALTER'S LACKLUSTER PERSONALITY AND BUMBLING LEADERSHIP AND TO SCANDALS THAT HAVE TARNISHED PLM IMAGE. WHILE VERE BIRD WILL BE PREMIER, DOMINANT FIGURE IN NEW GOVERNMENT WILL BE HIS SON, LESTER BIRD.

3. ALP WILL UNDOUBTEDLY FIND THE GOING DIFFICULT. NOT ONLY WILL NEW GOVERNMENT INHERIT STAGNANT ECONOMY AND MASSIVE INDEBTEDNESS, ITS LACK OF STRONG POPULAR SUPPORT, WALTER'S CONTROL OF MOST IMPORTANT LABOR UNION IN COUNTRY AND PRO-SECESSION AND PRO-AUTONOMY SENTIMENT IN DEPENDENCY OF BARBUDA ALL POSE PROBLEMS WITH OBVIOUS CONSEQUENCES FOR BOTH ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL STABILITY. IT REMAINS TO BE SEEN WHAT ALP WILL DO IN REGARD TO QUESTION OF INDEPENDENCE. THOUGH SUPPORTING CHANGE IN PRESENT CONSTITUTIONAL STATUS, ALP HAS HITHERTO INSISTED THAT SUCH CHANGE CAN ONLY COME ABOUT THROUGH POPULAR REFERENDUM. IF, NOW THAT IT HAS ACHIEVED POWER, IT SHOULD REVERSE ITS STAND ON THIS POINT, ITS CREDIBILITY WOULD OBVIOUSLY SUFFER. THERE IS CONSIDERABLE DOUBT, HOWEVER, THAT REFERENDUM WOULD RESULT IN NECESSARY TWO-THIRDS MAJORITY FOR INDEPENDENCE. ON OTHER HAND, DEPUTY BRITISH GOVERNMENT REPRESENTATIVE GILLET TOLD EMBOFF YESTERDAY THAT, SHOULD ALP WIN, BIRD HAD PROMISED TO INCLUDE PLM IN DISCUSSIONS WITH HMG ON INDEPENDENCE; THIS WOULD MAKE IT EASIER FOR HMG TO PERMIT CHANGE IN STATUS WITHOUT REFERENDUM.

4. IMPLICATION OF ALP VICTORY FOR US INTERESTS ARE DIFFICULT TO ASSESS. WALTER HAS SHOWN DISAPPOINTMENT WITH WHAT IT CONSIDERS USG'S LACK OF INTEREST IN ANTIGUA AND HAS CONDUCTED PERSISTENT CAMPAIGN TO HAMSTRING AND UNDERMINE WEST INDIES OIL COMPANY (WIOC), PRINCIPAL US INVESTMENT IN ANTIGUA. NEVERTHELESS, HE HAS SEVERAL TIMES INDICATED HIS SUPPORT FOR CONTINUED OPERATION OF US NAVAL FACILITY AND USAF TRACKING STATION.

WITH ALP IN POWER, USG WILL START WITH CLEAN SLATE. AS FAR AS WIOC IS CONCERNED, HOWEVER, IT STILL INTENDS TO CLOSE DOWN AND ADVENT OF NEW GOVERNMENT, WHICH IS CONSIDERED FRIENDLY TO IT, COULD MAKE CLOSING DOWN MORE DIFFICULT, SINCE THERE IS EXPECTATION THAT, ON CONTRARY, IT WILL RESUME OPERATIONS. ALP'S POSITION ON NAVAL FACILITY AND TRACKING STATION IS NOT KNOWN, BUT THERE IS NO REASON TO FEAR THAT ATTITUDE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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OF NEW GOVERNMENT WILL BE ANY DIFFERENT FROM WHAT THAT OF PLM GOVERNMENT WAS. LESTER BIRD, WHO WAS NOT ONLY BORN IN US BUT ALSO ATTENDED UNIVERSITY THERE, IS GENERALLY REGARDED AS PRO-AMERICAN. BRITTON

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